

LESSON 1

UNDERSTANDING HISTORY



Focus Activity

READ TO LEARN

What do historians do to look into the past?

VOCABULARY

history

oral tradition

artifact

primary source

secondary source

READ ALOUD

How has your life changed from the way it was five years ago? You're probably playing different games and have long outgrown your old clothes. Your family may have moved into a new home. Your life will continue to change as you grow older. Look around carefully. Ten years from now, everything around you—every object you use, every song you enjoy listening to—will help tell the story of what your life was like today.

THE BIG PICTURE

As the story of your life unfolds, it becomes part of an even bigger story of human history. History is the story of the past. People who study what has happened in the past are called historians. They may study details of daily life, or they may examine events that have changed the world. Historians have learned, for example, that people in Central America first enjoyed what we now call bubble gum hundreds of years ago. Historians have also learned how terrible wars brought huge changes for these same people in Central America.

Whether they study life-changing events or interesting details, historians use different kinds of sources, from books to bones, to discover what life was like in the past. Sources are an historian's most important tools. Like all tools, they need to be used carefully and skillfully.

HISTORY ALL AROUND

Nina was so excited that she forgot to say hello as she burst through her grandfather's front door.

"Grandpa, guess what? We're getting a new computer tonight!"

"Why, hello Nina," Grandpa Joe replied, putting down his magazine. "What is all this I hear about a new computer?"

"It's a lot more powerful, so my friends and I can play CD-ROMs on it."

"Whoa, Nina," laughed Grandpa Joe. "I still don't understand that much about computers. See, back when I was your age, we didn't even have television. Most people didn't."

"What?" gasped Nina.

"It's true," her grandfather continued. "Back in 1950 our family was the first in our neighborhood to get a TV. That was a big deal! I'll never forget how our neighbors crowded around that TV wanting to see all the new shows. . . ."

Grandpa Joe was describing the past using oral tradition—passing on history by word of mouth. Oral tradition is an important way that people remember the past. This was how history was kept alive before writing was invented.

"You know," mused Grandpa Joe, "I kept that old TV set. It's up in the attic. You should see it! It's nothing like what we have today."


"Hmmm . . . OK," answered Nina, her curiosity getting the better of her.

Learning from Artifacts

The old TV was definitely an artifact (AHR tuh fakt) from another time. An artifact is an object made by someone in the past. The TV's small screen was housed in a big, bulky, wooden cabinet.

It was hard to imagine that such a homely machine had once been the center of so much attention.

Propped up against the TV was another artifact—a large plastic ring that rattled when Nina picked it up. What did it do? Nina shook it, rolled it, then looped it around her shoulder. She decided to take it with her and figure it out later.



An attic or storeroom (above) can be an excellent place to find artifacts from the past. An old camera is an example of an artifact.

DIFFERENT SOURCES

On the shelf next to the TV lay other interesting artifacts: a dusty model of an old car, a big scrapbook filled with newspaper clippings, and a yellowing stack of magazines.

Nina scooped up as many items as she could, along with a newer-looking book called *God's Country: America in the Fifties*. Then she headed back downstairs to examine her finds.

Using Primary Sources

Except for the book, all of the items that Nina picked up in the attic were primary sources from the 1950s. Primary sources are materials that were created during the time under study. They can be written things, such as magazine articles or advertisements. They can also be nonwritten things, such as toys or tools or pictures.

Read the following excerpt from one of Nina's written sources. It describes a time in America's past when televisions were a novelty. What clues in the text tell you this is a primary source?

MANY VOICES PRIMARY SOURCE

Excerpt from
an interview published in *Television*,
by Michael Winship, 1988.

I first saw television when I was a kid growing up in Brooklyn. . . . We didn't own a television set—most people didn't. But the Texaco Star Theater with Milton Berle was on Tuesday nights. So we all stood on the street, and the people who had a television set on my block would put it in the window facing the street. Half the block would gather—maybe 50 people would watch the show.



In the early days of television, not everyone was lucky enough to own their own set (above). Often, people would crowd sidewalks to watch (left).



A Secondary Source

Secondary sources are records of the past that are based on studies of primary sources. Nina's secondary source was the book *God's Country: America in the Fifties*. This is a study of life in the 1950s written by J. Ronald Oakley in 1986. Read the following excerpt from *America in the Fifties*.

In the America of 1950, almost 90 percent of all families did not have a television set. . . . By the early 1960s, 90 percent of all American homes had at least one television set. Never had a new product expanded so rapidly or so quickly become an essential part of American life.

How does the information given in this secondary source differ from the information given in the primary source on the previous page?

Different Viewpoints

Nina could appreciate the old TV in the attic much more now that she knew how rare TVs were in 1950. But what could she make of the cars from the 1950s?

"They were so huge, so different from the cars we have today," Nina marveled as she picked up the old car model. "They couldn't have been very practical—and they must have been real gas guzzlers, too."

"But people didn't care that much about being practical back then," Grandpa Joe answered. "We wanted comfort and grandness, and those cars delivered!" To support his opinion, Grandpa Joe turned to an old car advertisement in his scrapbook. Look at the advertisement on this page.

Nina and her grandfather looked at the model car from different viewpoints. Nina noticed how the car contrasted

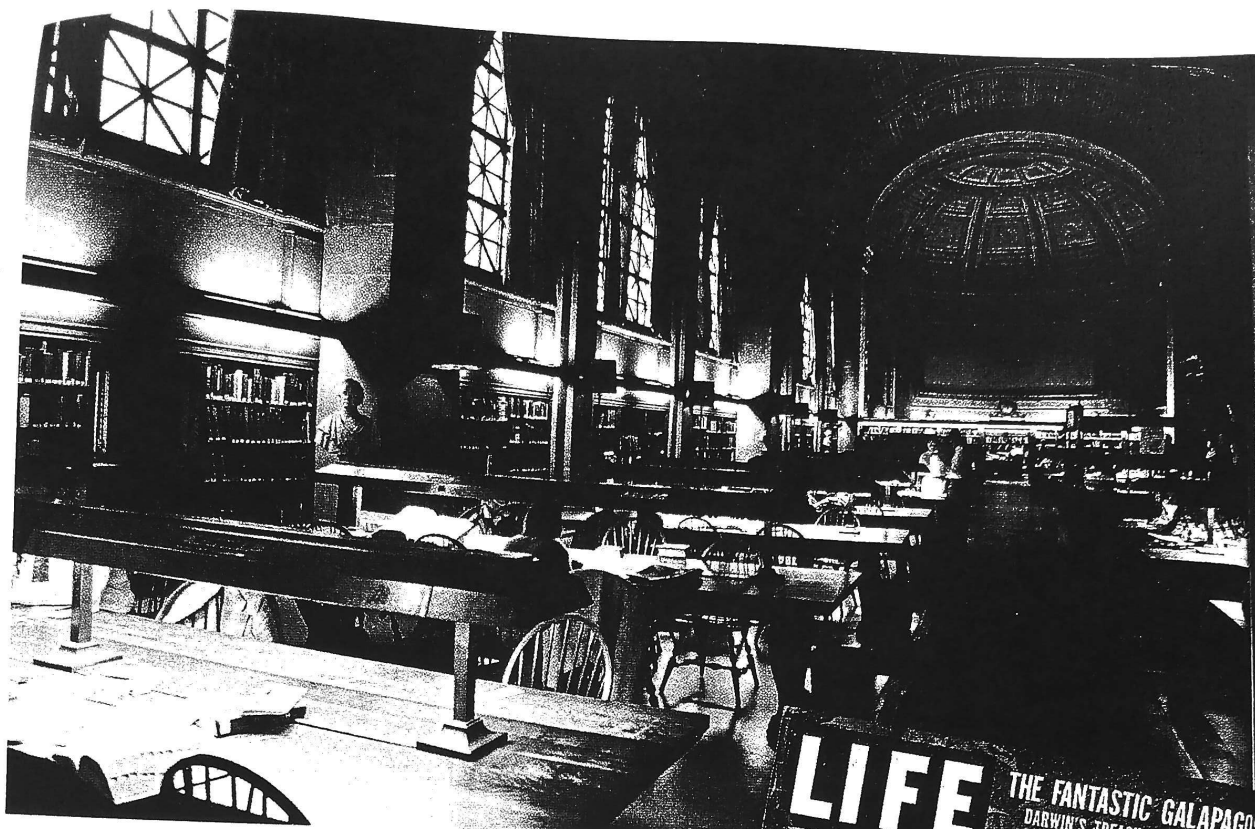


An advertisement in a scrapbook can show what was important to car buyers in the 1950s.

with today's cars. On the other hand, Grandpa Joe was reminded of people's attitudes about cars during the 1950s. These different viewpoints brought them to different conclusions.

Historians often disagree about how sources should be interpreted, or how life in a past time should be remembered. Since their own viewpoints shape the way they view the past, historians can end up constructing different pictures of the same historical period.

Historians also have trouble reconstructing the past. The further back in time something happened, the harder their job becomes. In addition, many important sources from the past have been destroyed or lost. This makes it impossible to understand certain past cultures and events.



PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Based on the sources she had to work with, Nina was beginning to put together a picture of what life was like in the 1950s. In some ways the 1950s were similar to the 1990s. People worked hard and enjoyed relaxing with their families and friends. There were major differences, too. Television was still a new invention, so it was just starting to become the basic part of American life it is today. Cars were larger and used more gasoline. Conserving natural resources such as oil was not as much of a concern then as it is now.

Looking at an Artifact

But what purpose did the big plastic ring serve? The answer came as Nina flipped through a 1958 issue of *Life* magazine. A photograph in an article caught her eye. It showed teenagers swinging the rings around their waists.



A library is a good place to find primary and secondary sources. Your local library probably has sections for books and magazines from the past. Many modern libraries now also have computers and CD-ROMs.

The
and
craz
hit t
pag

Cor
N
sour
ans.
thin
writ
hooj
V
wor
She
sour
in th
also
purp
Last
sour
culti

ten
past
sciel
next

The article called the rings “hula hoops” and said they were “the newest national craze. . . bigger than anything that ever hit the toy business.” You can see a page from that article on page 28.

Combining Sources

Nina’s article shows why written sources can be so valuable to historians. They can speak for people and things from another time. The article, a written source, helped explain the hula hoop, an artifact.

Without realizing it Nina had done work similar to that of a true historian. She used primary and secondary sources to shed light on her topic, life in the United States in the 1950s. She also examined artifacts to learn their purpose and importance in a culture. Lastly, she used and interpreted written sources to try to understand one of a culture’s customs.

WHY IT MATTERS

The work of an historian is like that of a detective. Clues to an historical period or event may be deeply buried. So historians have to rebuild the past as accurately as possible, using the evidence that is available to them. Sometimes key evidence has been lost or destroyed, making the job even harder.

Historians are not alone in their task, however. They have skilled partners—scientists—who help them uncover written and unwritten sources from the past. You will read about these scientists and the work they do in the next lesson.

Reviewing Facts and Ideas

SUM IT UP

- History is the study of what happened in the past.
- Before writing was invented, history was passed down through oral tradition, or word of mouth.
- Artifacts, or objects made in the past, can also tell how people lived.
- Historians use primary and secondary sources to interpret what life was like in the past.
- The sources that historians use, the way they use these sources, and their points of view, shape the way the past is remembered.

THINK ABOUT IT

1. How does oral tradition differ from a written source? How can both help to preserve history?
2. What is a secondary source? Give an example of a secondary source you use at school.
3. **FOCUS** How do sources help us to learn about the past?
4. **THINKING SKILL** What *effects* do the sources available to a historian have on the ways she or he understands the past? How might a historian’s point of view affect the way she or he understands history?
5. **WRITE** Use your imagination to write about how the artifacts in your classroom might be viewed by an historian 100 years from now. What are three conclusions the historian could make from these artifacts about life in the 1990s?